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ABSTRACT

This paper explores interactivity, and considers what should be done to create a mass market for interactive media. It is suggested that one way to do so is to examine the video game phenomenon, and a model of interactivity is proposed. The model, a "home interactive theater," would involve interaction in the telling of a story, with the interactor given some room for self-expression in the context of interesting events, although no control over changing the end of the story. It is suggested that, in this context, interaction should have more to do with taking part than with making decisions. (EW)

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Stand By For Fun

Experience and Interaction

Douglas Crockford
Lucasfilm Ltd.

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Lamppost

Before I begin to get to the point of this article, which is about Experience in the context of "home interactive theatre," I'd like to share a little story with you. It is a well known story, so stop me if you've heard it before.

There's a drunk on his hands and knees under a lamppost. A guy walks up and says "What are you doing?" and the drunk says "I'm looking for my keys. I dropped them over there." So the guy asks "Then why are you looking over here?" and the drunk says "Because the light's better."

The point of that story should become clearer as we expose the issues of interactivity and experience to the illuminating lamppost of reason.

I am going to be talking specifically about entertainment products. Any educational products that I produce will also be entertainment products, even if they happen to be about Geography. I need to say that at the beginning in order to make this all seem to be relevant.

Another Revolution

We are standing here at the dawning of another one of those technical revolutions. This one is the next major breakthrough in interactive entertainment and education. There is activity all over the place in new media which promise to deliver valuable experiences to the folks at home and the kids at school. The most visible examples are the Philips CD-I system and its obvious enhancements and imitators. Expectations for these new systems range from a gimmick for trying to trick people into buying unnecessary home computers again, to the next-to-last significant step in the social evolution of man. The new media will offer neat images and sounds in an interactive format.

We are exploring the capacity of these new presentational media to entertain people, not just as novelty (although we are not above that) but as a new kind of storyteller, telling a new kind of story, and telling the oldest story in a new way.

The biggest surprise is that it is much harder than it looks. You would like to expect that you simply make the story ***interactive***, and that's enough to get the big payoff. You would also like to expect that everything gets neater as the delivery technology gets neater. Unfortunately, neither is necessarily the case.

The technology must be delivering messages which are more interesting than *"High-tech is a great gimmick."* The delivery medium does you little good if you are using it to deliver experiences that nobody wants. In the long run, audiences will not be judging you on the "highness" of your tech. This is equally true in education, unless it is your intention to teach Technology Appreciation.

We need to beware of the technology traps, the seductive things that technology can do for you that don't really have anything to do with delivering a compelling experience.

So, taking the moral of the lamppost story to heart, I have spent the past year wandering around in the dark, looking for fun. I can do that because Lucasfilm makes fun and not light bulbs. Lucasfilm is not a technology company, it is an entertainment company, and so when confronting a new technology, I can ask "Is it *fun* enough?"

Technology and the Quality of Experience

Is it ever the case that an improvement in technology brings along an improvement in the experience? The answer is often yes. Obvious examples include color television, Cinemascope, and stereo. But there are also counter-examples, including 3-D, videodiscs, and colorizing of classic movies.

Obviously, a lot of this stuff is subjective. There have been attempts to quantify "fun," such as how many stars a movie rates, but generally such systems aren't very scientific. The best of the rating systems is the Crockford Scale, which rates movies on an integer scale between 0 and 1. If I found that a movie was worth seeing, I give it a 1. I find it quite reliable, but then, that could just be me.

In order to discover the truth about interactivity, you need to separate technology from the experience, which is difficult because sometimes technology *is* the experience. Does recorded music get better as you turn the volume up? Often it does. Audiophiles know this, and by their tedious manipulation of subtle reproduction parameters, are able to trade psycho-acoustics for some other kind of psycho experience.

The Videogame Experience

Most of our experience in interactive entertainment is in videogames. There is much we can learn by reviewing the Videogame Age, which we do in the same way you might relive an automobile accident. Sure, we're stuck in the 80s, but we've learned a few things, which I'll share with you right now.

Right off the bat, the desktop metaphor of interactivity is inappropriate to real-time entertainment. The game experience is usually more direct. It is more like being in a spaceship than using a "user interface." But it goes deeper than that.

Let's turn the Wayback machine back just a few years. Videogames are a major force in American culture. They are everywhere, threatening the very existence of the movie and music industries. Videogames are big business. Videogame revenues are used to make military spending programs look reasonable by comparison.

This pretentious new little art form held an incredible fascination over this country, which was followed by a unanimous rejection in the winter of 1982. Why were videogames such a big deal, and why did they then become such a little deal?

The second part of the question is easy to answer. Videogames became a little deal because they did not really do anything for people. Most videogames involved some level of learning and skill building, but the things you learned and the skills you built didn't help you in living your life, or even in playing other videogames.

The first part of the question then becomes a real puzzle. If videogames didn't do anything for people, then how did they become a big deal in the first place?

I think much of the original attraction was in its promise. Here was computer technology, *hands on*. The science fiction fantasies were coming true. "Get a head start on the brave new world for just a quarter." The same naïve *Popular Science* enthusism that sold those millions of computers into closets also glamorized videogames. That enthusism will not be rekindled until someone can tell the folks at home what home computers are good for.

But there was more going on than that. Videogames were an exciting way to play for the children of the Television Age. It was TV that responded to you. It was a new form of fun, a new kind of experience. But ultimately, it was not satisfying, and people stopped playing.

The response of the game makers was interesting. The game makers responded to the public's complaint "Is that all there is?" with "Here's more color! Here's better graphics!" But it didn't do anything to stop the erosion in demand for the games. Videodiscs were expected to revive the withering industry. We saw one novelty hit, *Dragon's Lair*, and the decline continued. So here is your clearest example of improvements in technology not necessarily delivering the goods.

So what were the goods? What did the people think they saw when they first tuned in? What was it that they discovered was lacking when they asked "Is that all there is?" and tuned out?

If we want to make a new mass market for interactive media, then we should figure out what the videogame fascination was about, what people thought they were being promised, and find a way to deliver on the promise.

Whatever it was, it is somehow different from what we thought it must be. While the presentation capabilities of the technology are very important in constraining the experience, they do not define the experience. Space Invaders was experientially lacking and ultimately boring. The evolution of the succeeding games added complexity and polish, but failed to enrich the experience.

Interactivity

We know that the best new trick in computer technology is that it can be interactive, and we believe that there must be some important fun potential in computer technology. But we don't really know what interactivity is or what it's good for.

Interactivity is not by itself experientially important. Being able to branch and so being able to select the left door and then die because you didn't pick the right one does not work as great entertainment.

My model is the "home interactive theatre." I am telling a story, and inviting the interactor to become involved in it. I am not inviting them to change the outcome, because if it is an important story, then structurally the story must retain its integrity to the end. (And besides, it's my story.) The interactor instead gets a little slack, a little room for self-expression in the context of some interesting events, much as you might get when you hear a story told well while you sit around the campfire.

The experience should be safe. As much as possible, all technology anxiety should be relieved. Even Mom should be comfortable with it.

Everyone should win. The experience may be an ordeal, but we want only survivors. Whatever it takes to help people along will be dispensed as needed.

You should care. Even though it is fixed that you will win, there must be room for doubt. You don't really affect the outcome, because the outcome is success. The outcome is not what is important.

The presentation will be tailored to you based on your responses. Your choices don't affect the outcome, they affect the presentation.

There are some contradictions in the goals of the experience versus deliberate choice in the interactive environment. This paradox in the relation between freedom and interaction is known as Crockford's Paradox. It can be resolved by redefining the meaning of interaction. Interaction should have more to do with taking part than in making decisions. It is joining the dance around the tribal fire. It is not choosing to fire a gun into a crowd. It is finding the rhythm in the structure of the experience and resonating with it. It is not playing your horn in the middle of the violin solo.

Another model for interaction, which is not necessarily distinct from the one I just outlined, involves kinesthetic participation in a psychologically safe co-creative fantasy with powerful metanoic consequences. [See "Fun with Metanoia," an unwritten article by Steve Arnold]

Reader Participation

This is the end of the article. I am making it interactive by letting *you* determine the outcome. Please write your conclusions in the space that follows:

Douglas Crockford

Douglas Crockford is a product of our public school system. A registered voter, he owns his own car. He spent two years at Atari, Inc., and is now working at Lucasfilm Ltd., where he is designing interactive media and experiences for entertainment and education.